

Cassano, DP left out

AFP, Rome

Veteran striker Alessandro Del Piero and in-form striker Antonio Cassano were the surprise omissions from coach Roberto Donadoni's 20-man squad to face Portugal in a friendly in Zurich, Switzerland on Wednesday.

Del Piero has been in fine form for Juventus this season but he did not make the cut for the reduced squad for a Euro 2008 warm-up.

Cassano's fans have been clamouring for him to be included again, after more than a year in the international wilderness, but despite his goal-scoring feats at Sampdoria this season, he too failed to earn a call-up.

Also out of the squad is injured AC Milan midfielder Gennaro Gattuso, who missed Milan's trip to Fiorentina on Sunday, while his club teammate forward Alberto Gilardino and Juventus striker Vincenzo Iaquinta were both dropped.

Juventus goalkeeper Gianluigi Buffon also misses out with injury.

SQUAD

Goalkeepers: Marco Amelia (Livorno), Morgan De Sanctis (Seville/ESP)
Defenders: Andrea Barzagli (Palermo), Fabio Cannavaro (Real Madrid/ESP), Marco Cassetti (Roma), Fabio Grosso (Lyon/FRA), Marco Materazzi (Inter Milan), Massimo Oddo (AC Milan), Gianluca Zambrotta (Barcelona/ESP)
Midfielders: Massimo Ambrosini and Andrea Pirlo (AC Milan), Alberto Aquilani, Daniele De Rossi and Simone Perrotta (Roma), Franco Semioli (Fiorentina)
Forwards: Marco Borriello (Genoa), Antonio Di Natale and Fabio Quagliarella (Udinese), Raffaele Palladino (Juventus), Luca Toni (Bayern Munich/GER)

Germans eyeing bumper payday

AFP, Frankfurt

Each of the 23-strong Germany squad who competes in the June 7-29 Euro 2008 will receive a bonus of 250,000 euros should the team be crowned champions.

The bonus was fixed during a meeting here on Monday between German football federation officials and representatives of the players, Michael Ballack, Jens Lehmann, Miroslav Klose and Bernd Schneider, ahead of Wednesday's friendly against Austria.

As was the case in Euro 2004 and the 2006 World Cup, players will receive a bonus only if they qualify for the quarter-finals.

If they are eliminated at the first knock-out stage, they will receive a bonus of 50,000 euros, which goes up to 100,000 euros should they be eliminated in the semi-finals, and 150,000 euros should they lose in the final.

Germany, which finished third in the 2006 World Cup and was the first country to qualify for Euro 2008, is one of the main favourites to win European football's show-piece tournament.

The three-time European champions (in 1972, 1980 and 1996) have been drawn in Group B with Poland, Croatia and Austria.

Hamilton saddened

BBC ONLINE

Formula One star Lewis Hamilton says he has been left saddened after being subjected to racist abuse in Spain.

The 23-year-old Briton was taunted by spectators during pre-season testing at the Circuit de Catalunya in Barcelona.

"The truth is I feel somewhat sad," he said. "I love this country, especially the city of Barcelona. The people in Spain have always been very warm."

The McLaren driver has become a hate figure in Spain because of his rivalry with former teammate Fernando Alonso.

The former world champion complained last season that McLaren were favouring Hamilton and fell out with the Mercedes-powered team when they refused to grant him special status. He now drives for Renault.

The Briton, who eventually finished second to Ferrari's Kimi Raikkonen in the title race, said he hoped Spanish fans of F1 would understand his rivalry with the favourite.

"The only thing that I have done is to try to give the best of myself and try to win the championship," he added.

"At no point have I tried to deliberately prejudice Fernando but the fight has been very tough and my image in Spain has been severely damaged."

The International Automobile Federation (FIA) says Spanish circuits risk punishment as a result of the incident.

"We are surprised and disappointed at the abuse," stated an FIA spokesman.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 1



Ivory Coast striker Didier Drogba (R) slots the ball past the dive of Guinea goalkeeper Diarso Naby during their African Nations Cup quarterfinal at the Sekondi stadium on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

INTER KEEP WINNING Milan see off Fiorentina

AFP, Rome



The victory moved the reigning European champions up to fifth in the table, just four points behind the Viola in fourth, and with a game in hand.

City rivals Inter, however, stayed on course to retain their title after a 1-0 win over Empoli allowed them to open up an eight-point gap at the top.

Second-placed Roma slumped to a miserable 3-0 defeat at lively Siena to undo all the good work they managed last weekend in cutting the gap at the top from seven to five points.

Despite the victory, Milan coach Carlo Ancelotti is worried about his attacking resources as Pato injured ankle ligaments and faces a spell on the sidelines while Alberto Gilardino will be suspended next week.

"Now we have an attacking emergency, Gilardino and Pato won't play next Sunday. We hope to get Ronaldo and (Filippo) Inzaghi back," said Ancelotti.

Milan almost had a dream start when Fiorentina defender Manuel Pasquale crashed the ball against his own bar when trying to clear Gilardino's chipped finish off the line.

Fiorentina's Romania forward Adrian Mutu missed a double chance on the quarter-hour mark, hitting the woodwork with his first effort before Australian goalkeeper Zeljko Kalac saved his follow-up.

Giampaolo Pazzini was the next to come within a whisker of scoring but following some classy control on his chest he lashed his volley just past the far post.

But Pato sealed the three points 13 minutes from time when he latched onto Kaka's pass, turned his marker and shot home left-footed.

And deep into stoppage time Kalac made a wonder save from Alessandro Gamberini's close-range header to ensure the victory.

Inter Milan were once again the beneficiaries of a controversial penalty, just they were two weeks ago in a 3-2 win over Parma.

Julio Cruz lashed a left-foot shot at goal that struck Ighli Vannucchi in the side of the head and then may have glanced off his hand in the box, although even television replays could not show clearly one way or the other.

But the referee pointed to the spot and Sweden forward Zlatan Ibrahimovic fired home the penalty on 34 minutes.

Even Inter boss Roberto Mancini admitted it was not a penalty.

"That was not a penalty but then neither was Empoli's nor was the one at Livorno last night, they shouldn't have been given," he said. "These things change the course of a game."

SEE PAGE 18 COL 6

Asia's road begins here

AFP, Singapore



From an initial 41 teams, Asian sides have been whittled down to 20 and only the first and second in each of the five groups from third round qualifying will make the fourth and final round.

With Australia, China and Asian champions Iraq all drawn together in a "group of death", at least one will crash out.

The Socceroos begin their campaign under new coach Pim Verbeek in Melbourne against Asian Games winners Qatar.

And they have plenty to prove after a disappointing Asian Cup last year where they failed to live up to their reputation.

For his first game in charge, Verbeek has included a host of his overseas-based players, including 2006 World Cup stars Tim Cahill, Brett Emerton, Lucas Neill and Mark Schwarzer.

But in a massive selection shock he left out Liverpool star Harry Kewell, along with Bristol City midfielder Nick Carle and German-based Michael Beauchamp.

"I have now had six days with the players in Melbourne and I have made the decision that those players will not be required to travel to Australia," Verbeek said over the weekend.

"Obviously, the three players are disappointed that I have not selected them, but I appreciate that they were available to come if I wanted them to."

The other teams in Group A -- Iraq and China -- play each other on neutral territory in Dubai.

After years of striving for interna-

ional success, Iraq are longing to emulate their old feats in the 1980s, when qualified for Mexico 1986.

Norwegian Egil Olsen is now in charge and they will be confident against China with skipper Younis Mahmoud again teaming up with strike partner Emad Mohammed.

Nashat Akram will be keen to put the disappointment behind him of failing to get a British work

permit after impressing during a trial with Manchester City.

China has its own motivation to make only their second World Cup finals -- an eight million yuan (1.09 million dollars) bonus from the China Football Association if they qualify.

In a New Year's pledge, the national side, led by Charlton's

SEE PAGE 18 COL 6

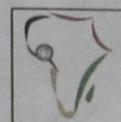


India star Sania Mirza makes a point during a media conference at her residence in Hyderabad on Monday.

PHOTO: AFP

HOSTS PIP NIGERIA Elephants run riot

AFP, Accra



Ghana did not buckle under the weight of a nation's expectations in a memorable win against Nigeria in Accra, Claude Le Roy's team coming from a goal down and playing much of the second half with 10-men to prevail 2-1.

In the later match, in Sekondi, 2006 finalists Ivory Coast lived up to their billing as one of the tournament favourites by crushing Guinea 5-0.

The 'Elephants' led 1-0 at half-time thanks to a Kader Keita goal and captain Didier Drogba, Salomon Kalou (twice) and Bakary Kone were on target as Guinea fell apart.

The Ivorians' reward is a semi-final date with either defending champions Egypt or surprise packages Angola, with Ghana set to face the winner of Monday's other quarterfinal featuring Tunisia and Cameroon.

Ghana were by far the superior side against Berti Vogts' Super Eagles, but they fell behind to a Yakubu Ayegebeni penalty with

Ghana's midfield maestro Michael Essien grabbing a first half injury time equaliser to send the 45,000 capacity crowd into raptures at the Ohene Djan stadium.

Mensah was given his marching orders with half an hour to go when he clipped the heels of Lokomotiv Moscow striker Peter Odenwingle.

But Ghana showed plenty of backbone and even at a numerical disadvantage continued to outplay the Nigerians.

With seven minutes left on the clock Sulley Muntari set up Nottingham Forest striker Junior Agogo to boot home the winner.

Mensah's red card leaves him suspended for both the semi-final and next Sunday's final should Ghana make it, with Essien in line to inherit his captain's armband.

Le Roy felt referee Mohamed Benouza was unduly harsh on his skipper.

"I don't know whether John deserved the red card. The referee was very fast to send him off. This case was not clearcut," said the coach.

"We took a risk not to change our formation and bring on a defender after Mensah had been sent off but we wanted to keep attacking. We wanted to win it."

The Frenchman, who turns 60 on Wednesday, had special praise for his players.

"I'm so proud to be the Ghana coach, congratulations to them all. They were heroes to first come back from a goal down, then hold on and get the winner," he said.

Ghana's Portsmouth midfielder Sulley Muntari said the team had pulled together once their captain was out of the picture.

"When John was sent off we were all conscious of the responsibility on our shoulders. We couldn't lose this match."

"It was a great effort to beat Nigeria, who aren't a weak side, with a man down."

Vogts said his team could go home with their heads held high.

"I'm very disappointed, we paid dearly for our mistakes," said the German.

"But I have a young team, they're not so experienced as Ghana who were in the last World Cup. My boys gave 100 per cent today, we lost together, we win together."

Up in Sekondi Ivory Coast coach Gerard Gili said of his side's impressive victory: "It was a complicated match up to the second goal."

"I always underline the discipline and the willingness of my players. Guinea didn't play badly and Robert Nouzaret (Guinea's coach) has done a good job."

"We have a team that doesn't doubt itself. We were here to put up a big performance and we never doubted we'd get it."

Nouzaret said he'd picked a team that could trouble the Ivorians.

"But unfortunately once again the defence gave away a gift. We tried to get back into it in after the break but after the second goal we didn't have any morale left."

Rijkaard remaining calm

AFP, Madrid

Barcelona players celebrated their 1-0 win over Osasuna on Sunday as if they had won the league title but manager Frank Rijkaard tried to play down the significance of the result and the fact that they closed to within six points of leaders Real Madrid.

"This victory is great for our morale," said Frank Rijkaard. "I am not looking at (Real) Madrid too much to be honest. They have the advantage and are the best at the moment but I am not focusing on them."

There are 16 games left to play this season and Rijkaard is convinced that Real won't be able to maintain their current form until the end of the season.

"I don't think Real are going to win all their remaining matches so we will have the opportunity to reduce the gap," explained Rijkaard.

"We have the desire and quality to become champions this season. We are fighting in three competitions and we will not give up in any of them."

"We have at lot to fight for - the Kings Cup, trying to win the Champions League again and of course the league."

Barcelona are in the semifinals of the domestic cup and the last 16 of the Champions League where they will face Celtic over two legs with the first leg on February 20.

"The majority of teams play like Chelsea," said Rijkaard. "They are organised and don't allow much space."

Sania drops a bombshell

PTI, Hyderabad

In a shocking decision, India's tennis sensation Sania Mirza yesterday pulled out of next month's WTA Bangalore Open to avoid being dragged into fresh controversies which have been dogging her career of late.

The 21-year-old Sania has cited the petty controversies that have been chasing her for quite some time as the main reason for the surprise pullout.

"I am not playing in Bangalore Open. I have been advised by my manager not to play (there) because a lot has been happening in the past few months," Sania told reporters here.

"Everytime I have played in India, there has been some kind of problem. So we just thought it was better not to play this time," she added.

Ever since her breakthrough 2005 season, Sania has been battling controversies ranging from her on court attire being dubbed indecent by Islamic fundamentalists to the recent flag controversy during the Hopman Cup in December last year.

In fact, the off court furores had shaken the world number 29 to such an extent that she had contemplated giving up the game altogether a few weeks before last month's Australian Open.

"It (pulling out of Bangalore Open) is not an extreme reaction. The controversies have been going on for a long time. It is not easy to deal with such stuff," he said.

"I have gone through great lows in the last few weeks. It has been difficult to try and stay focussed", she said.

Xavi delights Catalans

AFP, Madrid



Xavi had only been on the pitch for six minutes but showed great technique to rifle home the decisive goal and spark wild celebrations at Camp Nou.

Real's 2-0 defeat by Almeria on Saturday gave Barca a golden chance to close the gap but it looked like they were destined for a frustrating night until Xavi's intervention.

"This victory is great for our morale," said Barca coach Frank Rijkaard.

"I am not looking at (Real) Madrid too much to be honest. They have the advantage and are the best at the moment but I am not focusing on them."

"The rhythm of this game was constantly interrupted and a lot of time was wasted which made it difficult but we created a lot of goalscoring chances and we had a really good attitude."

The rain-soaked pitch was far from ideal but Barca created several chances with Lionel Messi and the 17-year-old Bojan Krkic, called up into the Spain squad for the first time, both going close.

But Osasuna defended well and Rijkaard brought on Ronaldinho for Messi with 20 minutes left.

However, it was another substitute who had the final say with Xavi popping up with a crucial goal.

Valencia gave embattled coach Ronald Koeman a much-needed win with their 2-0 triumph at Valladolid ending a miserable league run of nine games without victory.

Goals from Mata and David Villa lifted the club, who reached the cup semifinals in midweek, two places into ninth.

"We know what it is like to suffer but now we have won we can relax a bit and concentrate on collecting more points," said Koeman.

It was a first win since mid-November and welcome relief for Koeman, who has only been in the job three months, who had fans calling for him to be sacked after last weekend's 1-0 home defeat by Almeria.

Atletico Madrid lost out to Valencia in the quarterfinals of the cup and their sticky patch continues with a disappointing 1-1 home draw against Real Murcia.

SEE PAGE 18 COL 2



Barcelona midfielder Xavi (C) runs off to celebrate his late goal during their Primera Liga match against Osasuna at the Nou Camp on Sunday.

PHOTO: AFP

FED CUP Russia, China advance

AFP, Paris

Defending champions Russia overcame a volatile 4,000-strong Israeli crowd on Sunday to reach the Fed Cup semi-finals where they will be joined by China and Spain.

The Chinese won a nailbiter 3-2 against France in Beijing in a quarter-final which went down to the crucial doubles to book their first appearance in the semi-finals while Spain knocked out 2006 runners-up Italy in Naples by moving into an unassailable 3-0 lead.

Russia, who will face either the USA or Germany in the last four in April, had stood 1-1 with Israel in Ramat Hasharon overnight before Maria Sharapova won her second rubber of the weekend, beating Shahar Peer 6-1, 6-1.

Anna Chakvetdaze, notorious for her brittle on-court temperament, then subdued Tzipi Obziler 6-4, 6-2 despite waging an ongoing war of wills with the crowd.

Sharapova, fresh from her first Australian Open triumph, handed Peer her first defeat in 11 Fed Cup outings.

"She actually gave me confidence because she was encouraging the crowd," Sharapova said of Peer. "In a way I felt she was telling me 'I need your help, I can't do it on my own'."

"It was great, I said to myself 'I'm going to take my chances and win the match. I'm glad I could finish it off in style.'"

Chakvetdaze had to be cooled down by captain Shamir Tarpishev during the changeovers as the tempers became more heated.

"I love to have the crowd against me, and I use it to lift my own level. Today was tough because the fans

were very loud but I'm very happy to have won," said Chakvetdaze.

Elena Vesnina and Dinara Safina then beat Obziler and Peer 6-0, 1-6, 6-4 in the doubles as Russia looked forward to a tie with either the USA or Germany who are 1-1.

USA and Germany were set to square off Sunday but the matches were postponed to Monday because of rain.

In Beijing, China beat France 3-2 to boost home hopes for the Summer Olympics, but they did it the hard way.

China needed just one more win on Sunday to move into the final four after pulling ahead in the tie 2-0 on Saturday with twosingles victories.

But without their second-ranked player Peng Shuai, who had left the country to play in the Paris Open, they hit trouble when top-ranked Li Na lost 4-6, 6-2, 6-4 to

SEE PAGE 18 COL 4